

Briefing Note

No. 25
30.6.82.

INDUSTRIAL DISRUPTION ON BRITISH RAIL

NUR Stoppage. On 9th June 1982, the Left-Wing dominated Executive of the National Union of Railwaymen voted in favour of an all-out strike of its members on British Rail from midnight on 27th June in protest at the 5 per cent pay offer made by British Rail on 28th May. On 24th June, the NUR Executive voted for a total strike on the London Underground to coincide with the main BR strike. Both strikes were unnecessary; the decision to call out London Transport workers as well as BR staff on a flimsy pretext was in the words of Mr. David Howell, Secretary of State for Transport, "cynical and opportunistic".

The NUR Annual Conference, meeting in Plymouth, decided to suspend both strikes from midnight on the 29th June, overturning the Executive's decision. Had the Conference not taken place, the Executive's decision would have stood: ordinary members of the NUR (up to 40 per cent of whom had turned up for work at the start of the strike on 28th June) would not have been given the opportunity to vote on the issue, even though their jobs would have been put at risk. The Conference voted to refer all outstanding issues on BR to the Railways Staffs National Tribunal, and in the case of LT, to ACAS. They also decided that any recommendations coming from the RSNT would be referred back to a re-convened delegates' conference rather than the NUR Executive. As Mr. Paul Routledge, Labour Editor of The Times, commented on 30th June, 1982, the revolt of the NUR "is certain to increase the clamour for compulsory secret postal ballots before major strikes". On 29th June, Mrs. Thatcher confirmed during Prime Minister's Question Time that she hoped that legislation would be introduced to that effect before the General Election (Hansard, Col.747).

ASLEF Dispute. One day after the NUR Conference had voted to suspend the strike, the Left-Wing dominated Executive of the train drivers' union ASLEF voted for an all-out strike from midnight on 3rd July over the Board's attempts to introduce flexible rostering - a scheme to replace the eight-hour day with flexible shifts ranging between seven and nine hours. The series of strikes earlier this year resulted from ASLEF's failure to honour a firm commitment to agree to flexible rostering, signed in 1981, and British Rail's consequent refusal to pay them an extra 3 per cent. The Tribunal under Lord McCarthy, to whom the matter was referred, reported on 7th May in favour of British Rail's proposals. However, even though ASLEF had asked for the Tribunal to adjudicate, and British Rail had agreed to pay the extra 3 per cent, the union rejected its recommendations and has now called a strike in protest at British Rail's insistence that ASLEF should honour its commitment. Sir Peter Parker, Chairman of BR, said: "This strike call exposes the hollowness of ASLEF's position in first protesting that the machinery of negotiation is not being used to resolve the issue of flexible rostering, then totally ignoring the verdict of the independent tribunal which endorsed the Board's case for varying the eight hour working day within a new guaranteed 39 hour week", ('Times', 30th June 1982.).

Productivity the Central Issue. The British Rail Board has made clear that it is still not prepared to discuss pay in any form until the 1981 productivity issues have been resolved. The NUR decision not to strike had not changed the fundamental issues.

Modern working practices and better productivity are vital to the future

of the railways. However, current working practices have remained largely unchanged since they were agreed in 1919 to suit the requirements of the steam age. Failure to progress could be disastrous. First, an inefficient service jeopardises BR's ability to keep its customers and win more. British Rail has no monopoly of transport, and as Sir Peter Parker pointed out in a letter addressed to all employees, during the earlier ASLEF strikes "many of our customers found they could do without our services". Secondly, outdated working practices impose an excessive burden on the taxpayer. A 'Guardian' editorial on 23rd June 1982 estimated that "the brutal truth of the matter is that some two-thirds of the near £1 billion which British Rail will receive this year will go to feather-bedding restrictive practices".

Despite union claims to have delivered on productivity, very little has in fact been achieved. Between 1974 and 1981, passenger miles/net tonnes miles per member of staff employed increased by 3.7 per cent. In contrast, in one year, between March 1980 and March 1981, productivity in British Steel improved by 24 per cent and in 1981, productivity in the car producing part of British Leyland increased by 30 per cent. In the period since 1979, BR has shed just over 15,000 jobs, about 7½ per cent of railway and workshop staff. This is modest in comparison with other nationalised industries. For example, British Steel has shed 40 per cent of its staff since 1979, British Shipbuilders 17 per cent and British Leyland 35 per cent.

In 1981, the rail unions signed "understandings" on six items on productivity, but despite a commitment to reach agreement on these items by the beginning of 1981, they have so far delivered on only 1½. The failure of ASLEF to honour its commitment to flexible rostering is well known. So far it has only agreed to one of the six items. The NUR has moved on productivity only where there is direct benefit to its members or where its members are not significantly involved. It has agreed, for instance, to flexible rostering for guards and experiments with open stations in exchange for extra payment, better working conditions and in some cases extra NUR staff. It has not reached agreement on single manning on the newly electrified Bedford to St. Pancras line, and as a result new rolling stock costing £150m stands idle. Neither has it yet agreed to the removal of guards from the back of freight trains.

Government Support for the Railways. The unions claim that the problem on British Rail stems from the Government's refusal to provide greater resources. Nothing could be further from the truth. In 1981, the Passenger Service Obligation (PSO) grant was increased by £110m and now stands at £804m - over £2m a day. The Board's external financing limit stands at £950m, and since this Government took office, has been substantially higher in real terms than in any of the previous four years. British Rail's investment ceiling of £428m this year is the same in real terms as it was under the Labour Government. In 1981, the Government agreed in principle to a programme of mainline electrification based on better business performance and productivity.

The Future for the Railways. With such substantial financial support the future of the railways could be very promising. However, if they continue to refuse to deliver on productivity, the unions will set British Rail on a steep downward path. British Rail's finances are in a parlous state. Despite record levels of Government grant, they stand to lose at least £165m this year (£80m of which was due to the ASLEF strikes in January and February).

In a strongly worded statement issued on 29th June, the British Rail Board stated: "Both from ASLEF and the NUR there are unfulfilled commitments from last year's productivity settlements. There can be no more pay until these are delivered - and the unions have until July 30th."